

# The Year That Was 2005

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Once again “The Year That Was” attempts to capture what occurred across the Wimmera and Mallee. While I know very well what happened on our own farm, I can only try and summarise what has been experienced in the wider communities of the Wimmera and Mallee in yet another tricky year for farmers.

Weather forecasts for the entire year indicated that there were no strong signals to determine extreme variations from average conditions. Unfortunately this did not mean average conditions, which most of us would be happy with after the last eight indifferent seasons. The wet October surprised everybody, and it was indeed pleasant to experience a wet and cool end to spring. Every dry year we experience makes the thought of being bogged with seeders more appealing but when will we see this again?

2005 began with most farmers having stored moisture after excellent rains in November and December of 2004. Many recorded falls in excess of 100mms for the summer. Summer weed control was critical for both stored moisture and nitrogen accumulation. Trials by BCG demonstrated that through controlling summer weeds we could conserve up to 60mms of water and store an extra 25kgs of nitrogen. This translated into at least 1 tonne to the hectare of potential yield. While the discussion is ongoing about the best method to control weeds, more and more farmers are converting to direct drill and thus chemical control became more common.

After our wet start, the autumn turned into a replica of the past number of seasons (how many now?). Dry, dusty autumn weather is fantastic for contrasting colours, magnificent sunsets and photographs but most farmers I am sure are longing for the huge storms and rain fronts that characterised the early 70's. A Total Fire Ban greeted keen winter sport participants in the North West early in the season. Playing winter sport in 38 degree temperatures tested the pre-season training of many. Sheep feed once again was an issue and many bare paddocks were evident.

Sowing started by the calendar and not the clouds. With hindsight of past experiences and increased confidence in the season because of stored water many farmers were encouraged to sow dry this year. Some completed their cropping before opening rains in mid June, whilst others waited, looking for a weed kill and moisture before sowing. Steady rain for 48 hours on June 10,11 & 12 heralded the break of the season and the farmers in the Wimmera Mallee smiled broadly. Fertiliser prices were high and there was a lot of pressure in the community. Soil tests confirmed that good summer rains and poor yields from past seasons meant that many paddocks did not require nitrogen and only minimal phosphorus so fertiliser rates were generally low. Because of the late break many farmers decided against sowing canola. Crops emerged successfully in favourable conditions.

Yitpi was once again the preferred wheat variety and was sown in over 50% of the wheat area. Clearfield Janz was sown in paddocks with bad weed infestations and numerous other varieties made up the remainder. Barley was more of a mixture with the 30 year old Schooner variety still being popular, followed by Sloop varieties. Gairdner was also common in Southern regions in particular, some farmers in the Southern Mallee sowed Gairdner after the ideal time but still achieved excellent yields. Nugget lentils gained in popularity over the traditional Digger. There were almost as many Canola and Field Pea varieties as paddocks of crop. Disease, weather and pricing dictate that spreading risk with more than one variety is a sound strategy, even if it is a hassle at the critical cropping and harvest times.

Due largely to the dry autumn most of the region was below decile 5 for the entire growing season. April and May were very dry but the near average rains of June, July and August kept the crops growing. However, the nervous memories of past seasons had many on edge. A large number of Northern crops became infected with Yellow Leaf Spot, some farmers choosing to apply Zinc to try and alleviate the symptoms. Weed control in crop was successfully completed. September was critical to yields this year and many crops lost potential during this month. However, rain on the last two days resurrected flagging spirits and crops but there were large losses, particularly in areas with high sub-soil constraints. Apprehension increased as fuel prices began to soar.

Where crops had not suffered moisture stress Stripe Rust began to appear, even in the Northern Mallee. Many Wimmera farmers were now familiar with this disease but Northern croppers were not so familiar and a lot of fungicide was applied. October changed the season with a very kind month of above average rainfall and mild temperatures. Legumes in particular responded to the mild weather. With the soft, late finish many of the later sown crops continued to thrive and the resultant yields were excellent. Thankfully we did not experience the heatwaves and frosts of past springs this year. Many farmers saw the above average rainfall for October as an indication that we might be moving into a run of “wetter than average” years. The seasonal change was a pleasant surprise, even to forecasters.

Harvest began with exceptional yields being reported in the north and farmers generally happy to be reaping above average yields of barley. Grain quality was excellent yet high protein in some of the more stressed areas resulted in downgrading from malt to feed. Fickle weather is common at the start of harvest and 2005 was no exception, as isolated hail, showery days and extreme wind restricted harvest opportunities. Yield loss from wind damage was up to 1 tonne per hectare during November and many farmers with the benefit of hindsight would have been better off using contractors to bring the harvest in before weather damage reduced yields. Trying to estimate how long the harvest should last after the crop is ripe is becoming increasingly critical.

Harvest commenced with generally low prices. These prices were initially viewed positively as for the first season in a number of years there was plenty of volume, however, buyers soon became aware of the large quantities available and further dropped prices. Malt barley cash prices plummeted a staggering \$20 in two days and fluctuated by \$35 throughout harvest. Many farmers were once again asking questions of grain merchants, particularly when feed barley prices were once again back up to their initial prices. Legume prices also dived with the pressure of large supplies looming after a number of low yielding years. Canola prices began at low levels and stayed low. Marketing is an exercise many farmers will be re-visiting in 2006.

On-farm storage was vigorously debated in the farming community this year. During the 70's and 80's on-farm storages grew significantly but the recent commencement of warehousing, greater marketing options and a virtual end to silo queues, meant many farmers had not continued to invest. Grain receival centres, like so many farm operations, now operate as many hours as required. Truck driving during harvest is extremely arduous work entailing long hours, decisions about how to market grain and the threat of overloading penalties which all add to stress levels. The pricing fluctuations and differing quality parameters meant farmers were once again looking hard at on-farm storage and the option of being completely in charge of their own crop marketing.

Stock ownership in 2005 presented its own challenges. The boom prices for lamb seen in 2004 were not available this year and many producers were wary after erosion issues in previous seasons. Stock containment areas became common on farms. Barley from the 2004 harvest was cheap and many lambs were finished off on grain. Many lambs only brought minimal returns as prices did not escalate as in past years. Wool continued to be unimpressive, returns and prices caused farmers to question their stocking rates.

The increased adoption of direct drilling was once again evident in 2005. Many farmers indicated that they will continue to expand the area they sow with a single pass, either as reduced till or no-till. The escalation of input costs, soil erosion from cultivation practices and moisture retention from retaining residue on paddocks have all helped sway farmers more towards minimising the number of cultivations.

Land prices throughout the year remained strong, despite below average seasons and poor prices. Generally in 2005 farms were still being taken up at near record prices. An unfortunate consequence of this is that as farms become larger, the number of people in our communities decreases. Population decline just one of the many challenges we face living in an area almost solely reliant on primary production. Rural communities have faced adversity in the past and will survive.